



## Business

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May 24, 2007, 9:59PM

### Merger good sign for other practices

Locke Liddell & Sapp's move speaks well for how Texas firms are viewed

By MARY FLOOD  
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The planned merger of Texas law firm Locke Liddell & Sapp with a midsize Chicago firm could mean good things for other Houston lawyers.

On Thursday, Houston and Dallas law firm Locke Liddell & Sapp announced its plan to merge with Chicago-based Lord Bissell & Brook. The two would form the 700-lawyer nationwide firm Locke Lord Bissell & Liddell with gross revenue of about \$400 million.

Marc Watts, the managing partner of Locke Liddell's Houston office, said this is great for his colleagues and an encouraging sign for other Texas law firms.

"Firms elsewhere have been historically reluctant to merge with a 400-lawyer firm in Texas because of concerns about the cyclicity of the market," he said, referring to oil and gas domination in the area. "So this could be good news for Texas firms who want to do something significant."

Watts said the preliminary deal was signed this week and 75 percent of the partners in each firm must approve it for the new firm to be formed in August as planned.

Bob Major, a legal recruiter at Major, Lindsey & Africa's Houston office, agrees this proposed merger is significant for others.

"I think other firms view Texas as having a very, very distinct culture," he said. This merger shows a willingness to bridge that perceived gap.

Major also said this move says something about what he sees as a squeeze on midsize firms that see some work being taken away by the biggest firms with offices all over the world and to some small boutiques that can work cheaper.

"Midsized firms find themselves in an uncomfortable position," he said. Here two of them unite to form a bigger and more efficient front.

Larry Gray, managing partner for Lord Bissell, agrees.

"In the general climate in the legal market, this is becoming an awkward size. We have a need to be larger, have greater depth and breadth," Gray said. He said it will be easier to attract new talent with the larger firm and the varied practice.

Watts said this wasn't a desperate move but a serendipitous one. He said he expects no redundancies, no layoffs, but simply a bigger national presence.

"Our clients were telling us we need to be bigger," Watts said. "You have to pay attention, especially in energy and litigation."

Now Locke Liddell will have a "national footprint," and offices in New York, Chicago and London, he said.

Jerry Clements, the Austin-based managing partner of Locke Liddell, will chair the new firm. If there will be one firm headquarters, Austin is a possibility. But Watts said it is also possible there will be no headquarters, merely hubs like Chicago, Houston and Dallas.

Locke Liddell, best known recently as the pre- and post-White House home to ex-White House counsel Harriet Miers, has 399 lawyers. Lord Bissell has nearly 300 lawyers, but a bigger national name.

Locke Liddell has a corporate law strength with appellate, real estate investment trust, energy, public law and real estate finance practices. Lord Bissell has a litigation emphasis with regulatory and transaction emphasis in the insurance, reinsurance and health care industries in particular. It is also known for class-action defense and intellectual property work.

Gray said that despite the differences in their practices, the culture and approaches of the firms were similar enough that it was "like looking in a mirror" when negotiating with Locke Liddell. He said it wasn't like that with every firm they looked at.

The only city where both firms now have offices is Washington, and those will be merged. Locke Liddell's other offices are in Houston, Dallas, Austin and New Orleans. Lord Bissell's other offices are in Chicago, Atlanta, Los Angeles, New York, Sacramento, Calif., and London.

Locke Liddell was formed in 1999 in a merger between Houston-based Liddell, Zivley, Hill & LaBoon and Dallas-based Locke Purnell Rain Harrel.

Among firms with a Houston headquarters, Locke Liddell has the sixth-highest number of locally based attorneys.

Once the merger goes through, the new firm's 700 total lawyer count would still put it behind that of Houston's big three firms.

Fulbright & Jaworski has 976 lawyers firmwide, Vinson & Elkins 743 and Baker Botts 741.

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